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More theories about Oswald to exploit reader's confusion

LEGEND: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald, by Edward J. Epstein. Reader's Digest Press. $12.95.

By Priscilla Johnson McMillan

Three years ago Reader's Digest Press commissioned Edward J. Epstein to write a book about Lee Harvey Oswald. Now, a purported 400 interviews and a quarter of a million dollars later, Epstein presents us with "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald."

Since the title contains Oswald's name, the reader will ask whether the book adds to our understanding of President Kennedy's assassination. Unfortunately it does not. Given an opportunity to enlighten, Epstein has instead written still another irresponsible book which will exploit the reader's confusion and compound his doubts.

Epstein scarcely writes about the assassination. And, except for leaving a loophole for a possible "Cuban connection," he does not challenge the Warren Commission's verdict that Oswald alone killed President Kennedy.

Still the book's title and the publicity surrounding it lead the reader to expect a conspiracy, and in this he will not be disappointed.

What Epstein has done is write two books about interlocking "conspiracies," but he does not contend that either conspiracy led to the President's death. The first book should be called "Why Did Oswald Defect to Russia?" Its thesis is that Oswald was recruited by the Soviet secret service or KGB, while he was with the Marine Corps in Japan in 1957 or 1958, and that following his defection to Russia in 1959 he gave the Russians secrets about the U-2 spy plane.

The second book is much more complex. It focuses on Yury Nosenko, a KGB official who defected to the West two months after the assassination, and on the wars inside the US intelligence community about whether Nosenko was a Soviet "plant", sent over to convince US officials that Oswald had never been a KGB agent and Russia was therefore innocent in the President's murder.

It is to this book Epstein has given his heart -- this is the book he has written. He concludes that after endless battles the CIA and FBI, to cover up their pre-assassination "neglect" of Oswald, colluded to accept Nosenko's story. The CIA and FBI were thus locked in a post-assassination "conspiracy" with the KGB that endures to this day.

The book's first casualty is truth. Again and again Epstein bends facts and rewrites Oswald's personality to make him not the inept, self-defeating man he mostly was, but capable and trustworthy -- a plausible secret agent.

From childhood, to the Marine Corps, to Russia and back, Epstein has missed the facts and the feel of Oswald's life; so that the more I knew about a particular phase the more errors I found. Hence I was unable to believe even new facts which Epstein seems genuinely to have uncovered and which I wished to believe. While Epstein appears unable even to get simple facts straight, he goes to great lengths to establish an aura of authenticity, as in his use of the CIA word "fluttering" for "lie detector tests."

Most of his errors, however, appear intentionally crafted to create an untrue portrait of a secret agent. To support his thesis that Oswald was recruited in Japan, a "Eurasian" girl whom he knew there miraculously becomes a "Russian." Nor does Oswald ever "meet" anyone if Epstein can have him "contacted" instead. Epstein has even used a graphologist to prove that Oswald's diary was composed in two sittings and that a letter he wrote in Minsk was written "under active tutelage by a second party."

The most egregious example, however, occurs in a chapter called "The Underground Man," where Epstein cites the fact that for almost a month in the autumn of 1962, Oswald's residence was, and still is, unknown. Of this period Epstein says, "He was now, as he himself later wrote in a letter, 'underground.'"

Only the letter Epstein cites to support his claim that Oswald in 1962 was "underground," is a letter Oswald wrote nearly a year later to the US Communist Party asking, in an entirely different context, whether he should try to help it "above ground, or always remain in the background, i.e., underground."

#42, 58

16 APR 78
BOSTON GLOBE

Lee Harvey Oswald as a Marine, in Soviet Union and after arrest.

As it happened in real life, Oswald's domicile in Dallas in 1962 had nothing to do with his political activities in New Orleans in 1963, and Epstein's linking the two has to be called by its true name — dishonesty.

Another casualty is common sense. Soviet intelligence does not recruit enthusiasts, like Oswald, much preferring those who are subject to blackmail. Moreover, the chances are that Oswald did not, as Epstein believes, give the Russians U-2 secrets on his defection. For the Russians knew what they needed to know, the cruising altitude, and lacked only missile capacity to shoot down the U-2 aircraft.

Had Oswald told the Russians any secrets, they would almost certainly have granted him citizenship and made him, in effect, their prisoner. He could not then have left the country with a conspicuously Russian wife and drift from one job (welder, photographic trainee, greaser of coffee machinery) to another, shoot at Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, and write dozens of letters, as he did, to the US Communist Party, the Worker, the Soviet Embassy in Washington, and otherwise engage the attentions of the FBI. Having gotten someone on the hook, the KGB does not allow him to slip off so easily.

The book's final casualty is context, the atmosphere in which Lee Oswald breathed and lived his life. What Epstein, the conspiracy theorists and J. Edgar Hoover all have shared is a tendency to treat the pre-1963 Oswald as if he were the post-1963 Oswald, and as if every action which the KGB, the FBI, the CIA or the State Department took, or failed to take with respect to him prior to the assassination was of huge importance at the time.

But the early Oswald was a nobody. Marine Corps acquaintances called him "Ozzie Rabbit." Aline Mosby, a United Press International reporter who interviewed him in Moscow in 1959, found him so unexceptional that she could hardly remember him later. I, who met him at the same time, thought of him as "little Lee Oswald." And Richard Snyder, the U.S. consular official who dealt with him in 1959 and 1961, called the Oswald of those days a "tiny ripple in a bureaucratic ocean."

It was only on that dark November afternoon in 1963 that the boy we met ceased to be "little Lee Oswald" or, as he signed some of his letters, "Lee H. Oswald," and became, in a single, gigantic leap, the Lee Harvey Oswald of history.

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